



[Lev Vygotsky, 1896-1934](#)

## The socialist alteration of man

Lev Vygotsky was a Soviet scientist, educational researcher, theoretician and practitioner who died more than 80 years ago. At the present time his is one of the most recognised names in the history of pedagogical studies, and his fame appears to be growing.

Later in the course we will move to a text by Andy Blunden explaining [Vygotsky's Theory of Child Development](#). Among other things, that paper underlines Vygotsky's attention to detail, based on close observation of children. Vygotsky's

reputation rests upon his collection and organisation of empirical data, as much as upon the theoretical science that built upon these data, and upon the wider and revolutionary science of his time.

In today's attached and downloadable text it becomes clear that Vygotsky found it necessary to place his work within an overview of education, and of the place of education within the most comprehensive view of humanity and of humanity's historical and prehistorical development.

In a SADTU document that we will return to later in this course, a diagram is used which shows the field of education as bounded on four sides by a band that contains the words "Political", "Cultural", "Social" and "Economic".

But in fact these four are not distinguishable from each other in any organic sense. They do not represent any kind of unity-and-struggle-of-opposites. "Political", "Cultural", "Social" and "Economic" are all words for the same thing.

The Freedom Charter says: "The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace."

It is necessary to place education within a context external to the "classroom", so as to find a broad definition of education, and not a weak, contingent and utilitarian one. The separation into virtual bullet-points of "Political", "Cultural", "Social" and "Economic" tells us nothing. They all represent

one thing, which is “Politics”.

Acknowledging this allows us to develop the context, not as a list, but as a concentric spheres. This is what we are doing in this part of our course on “Education”, starting with Lenin, and moving to Vygotsky, Cole, Engels and Spinoza.

Later in the course we will come to Hegel, whose philosophy of human development is the one that is to this day still the most advanced, most extensive, and most concrete philosophy available. Hegel’s philosophical system is the one that was used by by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, V I Lenin – and Lev Vygotsky.

The contextual sphere around education would be the politics of the country and of the moment, or in other words what is called the “conjuncture”, made up of the balance of class forces and the specific, material circumstances of the place and time.

In bourgeois education, consideration of such context is to a large extent, if not entirely, excluded. History, for example, as taught in school, stops short of the present moment, and refrains from connecting the past to the present so as to draw political lessons. The Constitution might be taught, but in a conservative way, so as to present it (falsely) as separate and apart from the politics of the moment.

As we have seen with Paulo Friere, a pedagogy that would suit the oppressed majority of the people must refuse to

exclude the facts of daily political life from education in this way. The classroom of the oppressed must rightfully be in the world, and not isolated from the world.

Lenin helps us to see education in a general context of class conflict. Lenin places education within a full political-theoretical context, thereby allowing it to be understood as part of human history in general.

The text given here shows that Vygotsky felt the need to recognise both the political struggles of the moment (i.e. the formation of the revolutionary proletarian republic, the Soviet Union), and also the revolutionary theory upon which those struggles were based. He needed to place education within the lived, political society, and within the on-going development of human beings as a whole.

This leads Vygotsky to suggest that there must be a theory of human development that is not only spiritual and subjective, but that is also material, and even biological. We will look further at this question in the next item within this part, noting the line of thought, without necessarily endorsing every aspect of it. The point is to realise that education exists within the widest possible human context, whose boundaries are the boundaries between the socially known, and the unknown.

Suffice it here to read Vygotsky's own words, and to note that this most famously experimental and empirical of educationists (in the sense of basing his understanding on

observation of real children) found it necessary to reach out to the furthest margins of pre-history, and out into the disciplines of biology, evolutionary science, and philosophy, so as to be able to locate and to brace his work in a firm fashion.

Humanism is that kind of philosophy that says that human beings create themselves, and that the more they do so, the more socially conscious (i.e. scientific) they become of what they are doing. The more conscious is human development, the faster is the rate at which it proceeds. As Engels and Spinoza both remarked: Freedom is the recognition of necessity. Having understood necessity, humans are free to grasp it. This is the only kind of freedom that they have.

Without a sight of a wider context, the educator is proceeding as if blindfolded.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Vygotsky, The socialist alteration of man, 1930.](#)
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